

Health Leadership Forum II

Town Hall

May 24, 8:30 – 10:30

Welcome to the second annual Health Leadership Forum.

All over the county people are taking control of their health. It's an exciting time of change. I know that I have learned a lot about my health that I didn't know before.

The one thing I want to share with you is this: a healthier life requires individual action. But it also takes something more; it requires a community of support that empowers the individual to make healthy changes. After all, if it were as simple as eating one less donut and walking one more mile, the overweight problem in our nation could be solved with a few television ads and a billboard or two.

No, the cure for our ills requires us to come together as a community, to build a foundation of health, and to remove the barriers of isolation so that the individuals are empowered to make healthy choices.

The past year we have made incredible progress in building this new community. The evidence of change is around us.

Before I talk to you about the accomplishments over the last year, I want to remind you of where we started. Last year I stood before you and delivered the shocking news that our health care costs were rising at a rate of 12 percent each year. Unchecked this means our health coverage expense will skyrocket from \$107 million in 2005 to \$176 million in 2009. I don't need to tell you what that could mean to our workforce, services and programs.

The need to cut costs is obvious. All of you in this room have been a part of the county's effort to balance our budget and improve efficiency over the past several years. Whether it's moving parks to a more entrepreneurial business model or annexing urban unincorporated areas, we have been incredibly adept at creating new models of government efficiency that let us raise the quality of service while keeping costs in check.

The Health Reform Initiative is our most daring effort yet because it requires a cultural shift in the county, and a

behavioral shift by our employees. It takes individual action supported by a new foundation of community support. And by community, I mean the workplace.

As you will recall from last year, our strategy is twofold and addresses what economists call both the demand side, and the supply side of the health care economy – something that has been sorely lacking in America's health care system.

On the supply side I have co-founded the non-profit Puget Sound Health Alliance to control the cost of health care in the region by improving the quality of care people get. The Alliance now involves more than 100 organizations, including employers, unions, providers, health plans, and patients, representing more than 860 thousand people in the five-county Puget Sound area. Alliance members are formulating strategies that break down barriers to information in the health care system, and focus sharply on improving the quality of care in a system that, today, spends more than two thirds of its dollars on things that don't improve our health.

We are also working on what economists call the demand-side of health care; by making King County employees the very best informed health care consumers, and building a

supportive environment, so they continue to make the healthiest choices for themselves and their families.

We know that improving the health awareness of our employees will help prevent the kind of chronic disease that is costly to treat. Many chronic ailments can be prevented by simple changes in diet and exercise patterns. It's a win-win situation. King County's escalating costs are reduced and employees get longer, healthier retirements!

In 2004 when we looked at how employees use their health benefits, we found that 5 percent of members in the KingCare plan had health conditions that accounted for 58 percent of the total costs in the plan, and 20 percent accounted for 83 percent of all costs. Simply put – a small number of people were using the greatest amount of resources. When we looked at what those conditions are, many of them turned out to be behavior-related and therefore largely preventable – conditions like diabetes, low back pain, and heart disease. In fact The Centers for Disease Control has estimated that 50 percent of risk for

conditions like those found in the King County population is related to lifestyle and health behavior.

Working with people to improve their health not only makes financial sense, it is the right thing to do. Some employers are trying to reduce their health care costs by increasing their worker's premiums or dropping those with high-risk behaviors, like smoking. That is unacceptable to me and evidence shows these strategies don't work. They may save a little bit of money in the short-term, but they don't get at the root causes of the cost problem.

So – how are we doing?

The shift at King County has been dramatic. Ninety percent of employees elected to opt into the new Healthy Incentives Program by taking a wellness assessment in January. Industry experts were astounded at the level of participation -- seventy percent is considered excellent and we achieved ninety.

Here's another number for you: of the higher-risk folks contacted by Harris Health Trends to enroll in our health

coaching program, ninety-nine percent have elected to participate.

The nurses line we offer through Aetna has also been extremely successful. King County members call the line almost three times more than Aetna's other clients.

Our disease management programs have been incredibly successful, too enrolling

- 91 percent of people with diabetes
- 63 percent of people with coronary artery disease, and
- 75 percent of people with heart failure

We are also building communities of support for healthy behaviors by providing programs like "Weight Watchers at Work," a gym discount program and the Healthy Workplace Funding Initiative.

Nearly 200 people have joined Weight Watchers at work. We started with four meetings and within two weeks, expanded to seven. To date participants have lost a total of sixteen hundred pounds – that's three quarters of a ton!

Thanks to the Healthy Workplace Funding Initiative yoga classes, exercise aids like pedometers and subscriptions to health publications have become a part of the work life of employees.

The energy around getting healthy is catching on in other ways. Salad potluck days are sprouting up where people bring ingredients for salad and enjoy a potluck lunch together. Regular lunchtime walking groups are organizing and -- as you will see in our video later -- transit operators are using time between routes to do aerobics together. Table spreads at morning meetings are starting to include a lot more fresh fruit and yogurt and lot fewer donuts.

I know -- I'm going to miss those donuts, too.

This would not be possible without the active support of the county leadership present here today.

Much of what we have done in the past year was based on your recommendations.

You said negotiate discounts at gyms – we created the gym program for our employees and their families at more than 100 facilities in King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties.

You said exercise equipment and showers should be available – we conducted a countywide inventory of our facilities and will implement a policy that goes along with the new office building.

You said hold incentive competitions and we created the Live Well Challenge, which I will talk more about later.

In your packet there is information on your recommendations and a list of our accomplishments to date.

The impact this is having on individuals is incredible. Elizabeth Elliott at DNRP told the Puget Sound Business Journal that this has allowed her to reclaim her health and she has lost more than 40 pounds.

Karleen Sakumoto and Nancy Whitmark walk together at least once a week.

Caroline Whalen has moved some of her walking meetings from behind a desk to walking.

Transit operator Vernice Bassett has gone down three sizes by changing what she eats.

I am exercising regularly and have lost more than 30 pounds. I can tell you from personal experience that's a very empowering feeling.

In the coming year we have more exciting opportunities for people to improve their health:

We are developing a master contractor list to make it easier for you to find and hire class instructors and vendors with your Health Workplace Funding Initiative dollars.

We are launching the first annual Live Well Challenge in August, where teams compete for prizes and get points for healthy behaviors like eating smart and moving more. The competition is timed to keep the momentum going after people's individual action plans end. The Challenge leads to

the Health and Benefits Fair in October, where winners will be recognized.

In truth, everyone competing in the challenge will be a winner. This is a fun way to get motivated to eat smart and move more. I myself am recruiting a team and it is a great way to perpetuate the community of wellness that has developed at the county.

I encourage you to read the Live Well Challenge material in your packets and look for more information in the weeks to come. You can even start scoping out team members now to get a leg up on the competition.

The Live Well Challenge, Weight Watchers at Work, the wellness assessment, health coaching, gym discounts... Does any body see the similarities in all these programs? There all about building community to empower individuals to make healthy choices. A community of employees, dedicated to supporting each other in our challenge to build a healthier life. What underlies all of our efforts is the commitment to empowering individuals to improve their

health, and building a community of support around this new commitment.

The role we play as county leaders is crucial to the success of this effort. There are many roles we can play: we can lead by example, we can remove barriers, or we can simply support the grassroots efforts of our employees.

The focus of today's meeting is what we can do as leaders to make it easier for employees to take action to improve their health.

Empower the individual. Build the community of health.